

## *PRODUCTION PLANNING + RESOURCES*

# Christmas In August

*For churches thinking about mounting a holiday show, here's what you need to know beforehand.*

*By Evan Henerson*

It's May, and Lin Sexton doesn't yet know what's on tap for Christmas. In the world of house-of-worship theatrical production, uncertainty—even with more than 180 shopping days till Yuletide—might be cause for a bit of early panic. But Sexton, the creative arts director for the first Baptist Church of Modesto, California, has been in the theater game for more than 30 years. Whether the event is a Broadway-caliber adaptation of a novel or a series of skits, Christmas or Easter, Sexton knows the show will go on.

Sexton figures a June start will do nicely. Besides, she says, she doesn't want her team peaking too quickly.

Sexton is fortunate in that her campus has several performance spaces, including, most frequently, First Baptist's 1,600-seat worship center. But even a worship center with plenty of technical bells and whistles has been designed for clergy and choir activities, not so much for pageantry and choreography.

"There's no backstage to speak of and not a whole lot of room for crossover. You have to be very creative in the ways you get things on and offstage," says Sexton.

"Generally we've found our shows have to be one set," she continues. "We have no proscenium, no curtain, no fly, no way to change things. When we build the set, we're allowed to leave it up in the church. It's a great draw and gets people excited about seeing the show."

That "leave it up and share the stage" provision is a luxury other houses of worship can't always afford. Meaning that, when not in use, your manger, crèche, costumes and all other performance trappings must be off the stage and out of sight, storage space or no storage space.

Ease of put-in and strike is only one factor that holiday show directors and technicians must consider in spring when plans are underway for Christmas, or shortly after the holidays are over when it's time to start thinking about Easter. Other questions to consider: What kind of resources are already in place? What can safely and conveniently be brought in? What, despite its visual value, will prove to be a headache?

Consider also your costume needs and changing demands. Little or no backstage room likely means no dressing rooms. Sexton company members have had to bring bike shorts or leotards to wear under their costumes so that modesty isn't an issue during hallway changes.

Quite often, the newer the building, the more likely the worship space was designed with the possibility of pageantry in mind, says Dr. Dale Savidge, executive director of Christians in Theatre Arts (CITA). An open platform without a lot of pulpits and railing for choir lofts likely means more flexibility.

"With newer and more contemporary approach to worship, there's going to be better lighting equipment," says Savidge. "You'll have more flexibility of positions, more dimmers. Older churches hide lighting and probably don't use theater lighting."

"Start from the kind of building you're working in," he continues. "How much adaptation has to be made to the space? Budgets are a big factor. Some congregations put in tens of thousands of dollars for productions. Others don't have much funding or don't choose to fund heavily. That generally affects what they're able to do."

When George Halitzka worked at Parkview Church in Iowa City, Iowa, he worked within the requirements of a worship space that was essentially a high school gymnasium. There was a stage, certainly, but also an unusually configured auditorium that was wider than it was deep. Acoustical concerns could become challenging, as could blocking.

"Of course, you're turning the Sunday school class into a dressing room every year and storage is an interesting endeavor," says Halitzka, Parkview's former creative director. "We had most of our storage in the two projection bays in the worship center and wound up having to position the props in the same room as the projector. But you can't block the projection beam. That would be bad."

About those projectors: Halitzka loves to use them, maintaining that the effective use of projections can greatly enhance a production. For the original Christmas show *The Father's Gift*, based on the life of the missionary Father Damien, projections helped establish shifts of time and location.

"It's one of the most powerful tools we have in our dramatic arsenal," says Halitzka. "It's something more churches should consider since an awful lot have projection in some form. If you can integrate that into your production, it's a tremendous way to communicate information in an episodic play."

If the money is available and the church leaders are agreeable, transforming a space can prove to be mutually beneficial. To create its original Christmas-inspired musical *Follow Me*, for example, the Christian performance group Praisemotion built an entirely new platform and installed a new sound system at New York's Glad Tidings Tabernacle. Both the platform and the new system--enabling surround sound capability--became part of the church facility once Praisemotion's work was done.

"The first thing we did was tear the stage down and put in a new floor to make it more conducive to dance," recalls Melissa Collins, co creator of Follow Me and GTT's music and arts director. "We brought in an enormous amount of lighting, 300 feet of cable. We rewired the space to be able to accommodate the technical needs and electrical requirements. It was a total transformation."

Follow Me, which returns this Christmas, has now outgrown Glad Tidings' resources. The expansion of the cast and technical demands of the show, coupled with scheduled renovations to the house of worship, means that the 2006 incarnation of Follow Me will need a new home, and may ultimately tour.

For Christmas of 2005, Modesto's First Baptist presented *Christmas at Perfect Tree*, an original work about a family that ran a tree farm in the Pacific Northwest. In addition to constructing a faux stone fireplace, the production required the hanging of roof lines and shingles, some of which needed to be installed via a cherry picker.

"So you have to schedule when you're going to get it and who is going to drive it in," says Sexton, "and have they seen the safety video?"

Whatever they finally come up with for 2006, it probably won't outscale the resources of *Here I Stand*, a 1984 presentation of the life of Martin Luther for which First Baptist turned the worship center into a medieval German village complete with Wittenburg doors, two huge drops and historical banners copied from Albrecht Dürer woodcuts.

The production spilled into the worship center with a banquet in the lobby and pickpockets working audience members during intermission. The cast numbered 130. All of the costumes were original. The price tag: about \$30,000.

"I'd love to do it again," says Sexton. "We definitely would if it was a need or a request."

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